

A. D. 'Mac' McKeever

Despite lack of formal education, McKeever responsible for area's first 'real' water system

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Most men have an opportunity for a formal education but most men are not orphaned at five years of age and forced to make their own way in the world. When one can succeed with this type of odds, we can only admire such a person's efforts. Without one day of formal schooling, A.D. McKeever engineered La Camas' first water system.

Despite being a widower twice, this resilient man raised his children alone, finally marrying once more, this time to an old friend. Property owner, builder of buildings, engineer, loving husband and father — this was A.D. McKeever.

Archibald Duncan McKeever was born June 5, 1857, in a town on the banks of the Wabash River in Indiana (death records say Missouri, Jack McKeever said Indiana). He never knew his father because at the time of his birth, his mother was a widow. It appeared that life was not to be easy for A.D. when Mrs. McKeever passed away and left him an orphan at the age of five. His lone surviving relative was an aunt who took him in for the next two years, treating him like a son. However, in 1864, his aunt also died and poor A.D. was left an orphan with no living relatives.

So, at the tender age of seven, A.D. went out into the farming community to find work and a place to live. For a time he worked on neighboring farms for board and room. Although he was of school age and had a great desire to learn, the daily farm work prevented him from attending school. As the years went by, A.D. moved further and further south, following the harvest. Memories of his Indiana birthplace faded as he grew into a young man heading toward Texas. By the time he came to Dallas in 1880 he was 23 years old and mature far beyond his years.

In Dallas, A.D. found employment with a farmer named Daniel who owned a 100-acre farm, raised cotton, corn and potatoes, and badly needed extra help. Daniels liked young Archibald Duncan McKeever and nicknamed him "Mac." A.D. was accepted as a member of the family, with Daniel's 10-year-old daughter, Martha Jane, becoming like a younger sister to him. Although Mac was 13 years older than, Martha Jane, who was born March 26, 1870, the two of them formed a bond that was to last throughout their lifetimes.

The local school teacher also boarded with the Daniel's family, teaching at a one-room school house about a mile from the farm. She soon realized that although young McKeever was bright, he did not know how to read or write. Thus began evenings of lessons conducted by lamplight after chores and school were completed each day. Although A.D. was left-handed, he learned to write with his right hand.

Settling into the Dallas community, A.D. met 19-year-old Dora Viitow, a lovely young woman from a large but happy family. Her parents were Daniel Viitow and Sarah Chinault Viitow. After a short courtship, A.D. and Dora married, and in 1881, had their first son, Samuel O. McKeever. Another son, Charles D. McKeever, was born in 1883. Then, son Arthur in 1886. Sometime during this period, the family moved to Denton, Texas.

Dora became pregnant again in 1887, and A.D. McKeever decided it was time to look for more profitable work. Stories were circulating about the sawmills in the Washington Territory, so hoping for a new start, "Mac" packed up his family and came out to Portland on the immigration train. From there the family took the riverboat to La Camas, landing on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1888. (Throughout his life A.D. McKeever called St. Patrick's Day "the 17th of Ireland")

The Columbia River Paper Company had a boat dock that the riverboats used for unloading passengers and freight. Usually, the livery wagon was there to greet the riverboat but on this occasion, no one was in sight. The McKeever family disembarked in the pouring rain, and stood with their few belongings becoming thoroughly drenched. Story has it that Walter Marchbank who owned the livery stable, and all the other townsmen were in the local bar toasting good old St. Patrick. A.D. walked the few blocks to town and persuaded Walter to venture from the bar and out into the storm. Marchbank packed up the McKeever's trunks in his low wagon, and took the family to the Dunyan Boarding House on Clara Street close to the railroad tracks. There were three small rental houses next to Dunyans and the McKeever family quickly moved into one of these dwellings. It should be noted here that before a year had passed, A.D. McKeever purchased all three houses as well as several other pieces of property in and around La Camas.

Although A.D. originally went to work at the White Salmon sawmill located up the Columbia River Gorge, he soon got a job at the La Camas sawmill. The La Camas Colony Company had built this sawmill in 1883 out by the potholes near the lake.

A.D.'s youngest son, Jack, claimed "Mac" never worked at the Columbia River Paper Company, but there is a 1888 photograph which identifies A.D. McKeever standing next to the newly-constructed brick paper mill building. Other mill workers in the photograph included Charles and James Farrell, Charles Lorenz and Henry Karnath.

On Aug. 10, 1888, A.D. and Dora became the parents of Frank A. McKeever, who was born in the Clara Street house downtown. Dora gave birth to a daughter, Irene, in 1891.

After Irene's birth, the small house in town became very crowded for the seven-member McKeever family. A.D. made the decision to move out to the south shore of Lackamas Lake where he could do some farming. He purchased two lovely acres close to the lake, built a small frame house, and moved his growing family to their new home. McKeever rented out the three houses in town for additional income.

In 1883, Henry Pittock and his agent D.H. Stearns bought 2,600 acres of land from the Lackamas Lake area to the Columbia River in order to form the La Camas



THE McKEEVER family first came to the area in 1888. They are shown above just after they arrived. The bottom photo was taken around 1908 as the family gathered in front of their new home by Lackamas Lake. A.D. McKeever was responsible for the area's first real water system.



Colony Company. By the time McKeever moved to the lake, Pittock's son-in-law, Fred Leadbetter was busy buying up all the remaining lake side land. Pittock-Leadbetter had taken possession of all of the property surrounding the McKeever farm, but had somehow let McKeever's two acres slip through their fingers. They needed to obtain A.D. McKeever's two acres so there would not be a "dent" in their vast holdings. For that reason Fred Leadbetter approached McKeever in 1892 with an unusual offer. In an even trade, McKeever would receive six-and-a-half prime acres on the east side of the road along the lake slough in exchange for his two-acre farm. Needless to say, McKeever accepted the generous offer and the transaction was completed.

Around the time of the land swap, A.D. McKeever bought Camas' first water system in town for \$75. The system had eight taps and McKeever charged each of his customer 50 cents per month. Water was taken from the mill ditch and stored in a tank near the wooden Presbyterian church. Everyone carried their drinking water from "The Spring" which was in a ravine between Fifth and Sixth avenues, near Columbia Street (Division). The ravine later became a part of the mill yard, was enclosed

and filled in.

Expanding on his water system business, McKeever built a water tower on his six-and-a-half acres of land out by the lake. The tower was located about where the present mobile home park is today. He dug wells and put in pumps that were run with gas engines. Eventually he had three gas engines, three big pumps, and wooden water tower. In 1894, A.D. ran a water line to downtown La Camas. The water line was six inches in diameter, wooden and had metal wire wrapped around for reinforcement. A neighbor boy, 13-year-old George Purrier helped him maintain the equipment. Thus, McKeever founded the first real water supply that Camas ever had.

Sadly, in 1892, Dora Viitow McKeever passed away, leaving five small children in her husband's care. She was 31 years of age. After Dora's burial, A.D. went back to Texas to comfort the Viitow family and ended up marrying Dora's younger sister, 25-year-old Emma Viitow. The newly-married McKevers returned to Camas and a daughter, Violet McKeever, was born in 1894. The next year, 1895, Emma died. Her death certificate Oct. 17, 1895, states she